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ABSTRACT

A study explored rural African American parents' perceptions of their own and teachers' levels of communication and involvement during the prereferral phase of the special education process. Nine African American parents from rural Mississippi, whose children received special education services, completed questionnaires and participated in a group discussion concerning parent and teacher behaviors during prereferral. The parents perceived themselves as having high levels of communication and involvement during the prereferral stage and perceived teachers as having low levels of communication and involvement. Parent indicated their information needs, desired teacher behaviors, and suggestions for improving the process. Participants also identified parent behaviors that are critical to success and satisfaction during the prereferral process and asked for clarification on a number of parents' rights issues. Suggestions are offered concerning ways that educators can bridge the gap and build support for parents during the prereferral stage of the special education process. (SV)

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LESSONS LEARNED: EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES FOR PARTNERING WITH RURAL AFRICAN-AMERICAN PARENTS

This investigation explored rural African-American parents' perceptions regarding their own and teachers' levels of communication and involvement in the pre-referral stage of the special education process. The study took place at a national conference held in Memphis, Tennessee, where the researchers presented a seminar for parents of children who received special education services.

This study focused on parents from rural Mississippi, who were originally part of a larger data set. Data were collected through a questionnaire, followed by a taped discussion format to determine parents' perceptions of their own and teachers' behaviors in the pre-referral stage. Participants' viewpoints contrast with current perceptions of parental needs during the pre-referral stage and the low levels of participation by African-American parents in their children's education. Lessons learned by rural African-American parents about practical and effective techniques for partnering with teachers within this stage are described.

The enactment of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA; P.L. 101-476) was intended to spur the involvement of parents in their children's education, particularly parents of children with special needs. While IDEA validated the role of parents as decision-makers in the educational arena (Turnbull & Turnbull, 1997), this involvement has translated into limited participation geared toward signing written consent for evaluation or placement. Moreover, legislation does not require parental participation in program planning, development of classroom activities, or curriculum improvement. The partnership envisioned by lawmakers, professionals, and parents has not yet become a reality, particularly among African-American parents of children with special needs.

Disproportionate numbers of African-American children continue to be placed in special education programs (Artiles & Trent, 1994; Kauffman, Hallahan, & Ford, 1998). Furthermore, African-American parents' involvement in their children's education is very limited (Harry, Allen, & MClaughlin, 1995). The aforementioned challenges became the researchers' primary motive for conducting this study. The researchers believe that to ascertain why African-American parents are or are not involved in their children's education becomes not only important but critical to improve the level of educational attainment among this population, which will ultimately translate into a better quality of life.

The study took place at a national conference held in Memphis, Tennessee. The purpose of the conference was to address issues related to community development, churches, and education. The objectives of the study were: (a) to identify rural African-American parents' perceptions regarding their own and teachers' levels of communication and involvement in the pre-referral stage of the special education process, (2) to identify rural African-American parents' perceived needs during this stage, and (3) to provide information about lessons learned by rural African-American parents that educators may build upon to support parents during this stage.

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Method

Participants

The researchers presented a seminar on "African-Americans' Level of Parental Communication and Involvement with Teachers in the Pre-referral Stage of the Special Education Process". A synopsis of the seminar indicated that the session was open only to parents of children who received special education services.

Of a total of 26 participants in the seminar, 9 were selected for this study on rural African-American parents. Of these parents, 6 (67%) were females and 3 (33%) were males. All 9 parents, including two couples, were from rural Mississippi. Participants' chronological age ranged from the 20's-50's years with a mean of 26.6. In addition, participants defined their marital status as married, single, divorced, or other: 1 (11%) was single, 7 (78%) were married, 1 (11%) was divorced.

Participants reported their income at individual annual income levels: 5 (56%) between $10,000-$20,000; 3 (33%) between $21,000-$30,000; 1 (11%) between $31,000-$40,000. In addition, participants' educational levels (highest level of education obtained) included 7 (78%) with junior high (grades 6-8), 1 (11%) with a bachelor degree, and 1 (11%) with other (i.e., one completed 10th grade).

Participants reported the number of children in their families: 1 (11%) with one child, 1(11%) with three children, 1 (11%) with five children, a couple had six children (22%), and 4 (44%) with seven children, which included a couple. Of a total of 36 children, 17 (47%) received special education services. Parents reported the number of children receiving special education services by categories: 10 (62%) children received services for severe emotional disturbance (SED). One mother reported having 7 children receiving services in specific learning disabilities and speech/language. Of these 7 children, 5 also received services in SED. Thus, the total number of children receiving services in SED was 15 (88%). Children represented in the sample received special education services ranging from a period of 1 to 7 years. Table 1 illustrates the participants' demographic profile.

See Table 1

Procedures

Prior to implementation of this study, a program evaluator and two researchers at the university level, one assistant professor, and one elementary school principal reviewed the proposal of study, including the questionnaire and open-ended questions to ensure their appropriateness for the targeted population. Reviewers provided written feedback regarding readability, clarity, and format appropriateness. The final instrumentation incorporated this information.

The procedures for implementing the study followed four phases. In the first phase, the researchers reviewed the synopsis of the seminar, ensuring that all participants qualified for the study and granted their consent to include quantitative and qualitative data gathered in the study. The second phase of the study focused on the implementation of the questionnaire, which was divided into three sections. The first section collected demographic information. This was followed by a Likert Scale used to identify parents' perceived level of communication and involvement at the pre-referral stage of the special education process. The choices were "5 - always", "4 - most of the time", "3 - sometimes", "2 - seldom", and "1 - never". The third section asked participants to apply the same Likert Scale to rank the perceived level of communication and involvement of their child's teacher during the pre-referral stage. The researchers displayed the entire questionnaire on transparencies and read each item to participants to ensure completion.

During the third phase, the researchers used a group discussion format to document participants' responses on the questionnaire with examples and anecdotes. The researchers assumed this format would enhance the quantitative findings of the study. Participants were encouraged to discuss questions regarding their needs and the lessons learned during the pre-referral stage. A cassette tape recorder was used to capture the discussion along with recording the dialogue on large chart paper before the group, which gave participants an opportunity to observe written comments and to provide additions or deletions. Finally, parents participated in a formal presentation of the intended seminar, which was independently evaluated.

Parent and teacher behaviors, as perceived by parents, during the pre-referral stage of the special education process were quantified. Answers to open-ended questions were transcribed to assist in the analysis of qualitative data, and transcriptions were verified for accuracy.

Quantitative Analysis

Participants' responses were coded by a Likert Scale, whereby the participants indicated their perception of how often they and the teacher engaged in behaviors that best described communication and involvement. The scale ranged from a "5 – always", "4 – most of the time", "3 - sometimes", "2 – seldom", to "1 – never".

Parents' perceptions of their level of involvement and communication depicted high ranks. Seven (78%) parents perceived themselves as being "5" – always to "4" – most of the time involved at the pre-referral stage of the special education process. Parents ranked themselves highly in items such as: As a parent, I

- attended parent-teacher conferences.
- contacted the teacher when I noticed my child's academic and behavior problems.
- asked the teacher to provide learning activities that could assist me in working with my child at home.
- gave the teacher feedback about how my child was progressing with learning activities s/he had provided for me to use with my child.
- sought help from other teachers and professionals in order to correct my child's problem.
- communicated effectively with my child's teacher.

Two participants (22%) presented more scattered results, which included several "3's" –sometimes- and "2's" – seldom.

Conversely, parents' perceptions of teachers' levels of communication and involvement indicated low ranks. Only two (22%) parents perceived that their children's classroom teachers provided them with information about their children's progress on a regular basis and contacted them when their children had academic and behavior problems. On the other hand, five (56%) parents perceived that teachers "3 - sometimes", "2 - seldom", and "1 – never" communicated and involved them in the pre-referral process. Parents gave teachers low rankings in items such as: My child's classroom teacher

- contacted me on a regular basis to celebrate my child's successes.
- shared various ways s/he would try to correct my child's problem.
- gave me an opportunity to be involved in helping her/him plan pre-referral strategies to help my child.
- provided me with learning activities that could assist me in working with my child at home.
- requested feedback from me about how my child was progressing with learning activities s/he had provided for me to use with my child.
- provided me with discipline strategies that could assist me in working with my child at home.
- requested feedback from me about how my child was progressing with discipline strategies s/he provided for me to use with my child.

Two parents presented more scattered results, which included rankings from "5's" –sometimes- to "1's" – never.

Qualitative Analysis

The researchers analyzed and summarized parents' responses to open-ended discussion questions. When asked to describe what their perceived needs were during the pre-referral stage, parents expressed the need to have teachers:

- provide information earlier in the process about the situation and the resources available.
- conduct sensory screenings for children as an initial step.

- involve children in the process by obtaining their input.
- establish clearer lines of communication to discuss both strengths and weaknesses of the child.
- avoid educational jargon and provide clearer explanations.
- explain the long-term impact of diagnosis and placement.
- identify what parents could do to prevent school failure.

When asked about lessons learned by parents during the pre-referral stage, participants identified the following as key behaviors in succeeding during this stage of the special education process:

- make constant visits to the child's classroom (very important)
- communicate with the multidisciplinary team and provide input
- investigate information regarding children from sources other than the classroom teacher
- establish a working relationship with teachers
- ask teachers to send behavior reports everyday, which request parental signatures and return
- request extra homework for children and work with them at home
- enroll children in after-school and tutorial programs
- encourage children's improvement when they are successful and show empathy
- conduct follow-up activities with the teacher
- express concerns and support to the teacher
- be persistent
- share information with young mothers to avoid negative experiences, and
- be aware of teachers and counselors who will sell you their ideas, which you may not want.

During the discussion, the participants asked the researchers to address and/or clarify parents' rights related to the following issues: the special education process (particularly least restrictive environment, accepting and rejecting exceptional education placements and services, due process, sharing information and recommendations with teachers when parents are unable to identify strategies by "school names", tape recorded meetings, writing during meetings, and asking for clarification during meetings), classroom visitation policies, cum folder review policies, remediation for children who do not qualify for exceptional education services, and pastors or his/her designee accompanying parents to meetings related to the special education process. The researchers addressed each of these issues during this phase.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study suggested that rural African-American parents participating in the study perceived themselves to have a high level of communication and involvement in the pre-referral stage of the special education process. Conversely, they perceived teachers as having a low level of communication and involvement during this phase. Participants' viewpoints contrast with current perceptions on the low levels of participation of African-American parents in their children's education. This disparity suggests the need for further investigation of teachers' and parents' perceptions and expectations regarding their level of communication and involvement during this critical stage.

Parents' descriptions of their perceived needs and lessons learned during the pre-referral stage are practical and effective techniques for partnering with teachers. While the researchers' initial presentation did not include issues like parents' rights, school and classroom policies, and remediation for children who do not qualify for special education services, parents indicated a need for the researchers to address and/or clarify these issues. The parents' request for such clarity suggests they were not clear on these issues even after their children were placed in special education programs, and further exploration of parents' understanding regarding these issues must be conducted during the pre-referral stage.

The information generated in this study, by rural African-American parents, clearly indicates how educators may bridge the gap and build support for parents during the pre-referral stage of the special education process. Based on parents' recommendations, the researchers offer educators the following suggestions to assist parents during this stage. Educators must

- work to develop rapport and trust in the parent-teacher relationship.
- communicate clearly and positively with parents, without educational jargon.
- encourage parental communication and involvement with the multidisciplinary team, and explain how parents may participate.
- identify and share concerns about students' academic and behavior problems with parents and students immediately.
- ensure sensory screenings are conducted for students prior to the referral stage.
- identify strategies parents can use to assist their children and provide a plan for follow-up.
- explore parents' understanding of their rights, resources available, school and classroom policies, and the long term impact of diagnosis and placement in special education programs.

In reviewing the research findings, caution must be exercised due to the confined nature of this study. This study only examined 9 parents living in rural Mississippi. These participants were identified via a national conference on issues related to community development, church, and education. In addition, it is critical to consider the restricted research findings and literature accessible on this subject. While there is a profusion of information on parent involvement in education, there is a dearth of information on African-American parents' level of communication and involvement with teachers in the pre-referral stage of the special education process.

Without question, the researchers believe a strong partnership must exist between parents and school personnel during the pre-referral stage of the special education process. The need to actively involve African-American parents in their children's education continues to be one of educator's greatest challenges. Educators can not afford to have rural African-American parents view the pre-referral process as a paper signing activity for evaluation and placement of their children in special education programs. We must work together to bring the spirit of IDEA to fruition, which is to involve parents of children with special needs in their children's education.

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Table 1
Participants' Demographic Profile

Variables		Percentages	N
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Age			
Range 20's to 50's years			
Mean 26.6 years			
Gender			
Females		6 (67%)	
Males		3 (33%)	
Level of Education			
Junior High		7 (78%)	
Some high school (10th)		1 (11%)	
Bachelor Degree		1 (11%)	
Marital Status			
Single		1 (11%)	
Married		7 (78%)	
Divorced		1 (11%)	
Annual Income			
$10,000 - $20,000		5 (56%)	
$21,000 - $30,000		3 (33%)	
$31,000 - $40,000		1 (11%)	
Number of Children in the Family			
1		1 (11%)	
3		1 (11%)	
5		1 (11%)	
6	couple only	2 (22%)	
7	couple included	4 (44%)	
Special Education Services*			
Specific Learning Disabilities		7 (69%)	
Severe Emotional Disturbance		15 (88%)	
Speech and Language		7 (69%)	

* Students were receiving services in more than one category.